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ROLES FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN THE 1990'S

BY

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ROLES FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN THE 1990'S

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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The challenges of the new world order in which the United States finds itself in the 1990's mandate a fresh look at how our special operations forces should be employed. Without a Soviet Union to serve as our defense focus, we must reconsider the various threats to our security and national interests, and consider how best to train, equip and organize to address them. The public groundswell demanding economies from the government in general, and the defense establishment in particular, forces the special operations forces to examine their capabilities and to look for ways to accomplish additional missions. While many tend to link special operating forces with low intensity conflict, recent experience in mid-intensity conflict proves their usefulness in that level as well. We must be prudent in the choices we make about missions and capabilities in the near term, so that we don't eliminate or degrade forces which offer a great deal of flexibility across the wide spectrum of conflict.

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As the United States reduces the size of its standing armed forces, its special operations forces (SOF) are likely to take on increased importance to the National Military Strategy. Their unique capabilities will make them the force of choice for a wide variety of potential missions which are otherwise not suitable for conventional units. These new demands compel a fresh look at roles and missions for the Army SOF, and some innovative approaches to organizing to accomplish them. It may also mean that SOF will experience some growth while virtually all other sectors of the military establishment are taking reductions in strength and budget.

This brief study will review current and future strategic contexts, and some of the principal capabilities of U.S. Army SOF, as applied in their most familiar roles. It will suggest some new or adapted roles, and then consider how such changes to the roles and missions might impact on the organization or training of SOF units.

The sweeping political, economic and military changes in eastern Europe among the former Warsaw Pact nations have forced the United States to reconsider its threat model. Lacking the familiar presence of a Soviet military monolith against which to array our military capabilities, the U.S. military is responding to legitimate demands for reduction in defense size and expenditures. This change occurs as we struggle to make sense of our increasingly uncertain world, studying patterns old and new

for a clear image of the "new threat." While the United States cannot expect to solve all the world's security problems, it will still endeavor to remain "the country to whom others turn in distress."[1]

In his State of the Union address to the nation in February, 1992, President George Bush reminded us, "The world is still a dangerous place.... Though yesterday's challenges are behind us, tomorrow's are being born." We must realize that a change in one aspect of our threat array only means that others will emerge. While they are equally threatening to U.S. national interests, new threats manifest themselves in different ways. Major General Hugh M. Cox, then Deputy Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Special Operations Command, presented the array of challenges. He listed the growth of terrorism, insurgency, instability, and subversion in the face of rising nationalism and religious fanaticism. He also expressed a concern over the growing distribution of powerful conventional and chemical/biological weapons of great lethality.[2]

The so-called "War on Drugs" is still raging. The cartels and their narco-terrorists persist in exporting their cash product, illegal drugs, and their second order effects of wanton violence, corrupted government, and undermined social order. These and other challenges provide ample evidence that, as the importance and complexity of low intensity conflicts increase, U.S. initiatives in such conflicts must keep pace.[3]

The world as we know it has changed dramatically in the past

few years. Our president and others in positions of responsibility have contended that our most formidable enemy for the coming years will be instability. A convincing argument can be made that the general level of instability is increasing, as the world feels the impact of uneven development in the form of continuing poverty and injustice. Mr. James R. Locher lists the problems of overpopulation, rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, disease, and the unresolved centuries-old ethnic rivalries, religious animosities, and territorial disputes as pressures which continue to spark regional instability.[4] Thus, in the absence of a Soviet threat, and following the demonstration of U.S. military might in the Gulf War, most threats to the United States will come in the form of low intensity conflict. In that case, SOF will become increasingly important as an instrument of national policy because of its special attributes.

The United States continues to hold as a national interest the preservation of a peaceful environment, in which free governments can survive. In attempting to promote such an international setting, perhaps the most perplexing question is what "means" to apply to achieve our "ends." Special operations forces are uniquely suited to many of the challenges presented by the low intensity conflict environment. In many settings, SOF provide the United States with a relatively low-visibility, unobtrusive means of assisting Third World nations. Providing comparatively low-cost forward presence, their special skills and

versatility make them more acceptable to host nations than conventional forces.[5]

For example, the U.S. is still likely to provide military assistance to legitimate democratic governments in their fight against insurgency. The ability of Special Forces to train Third World soldiers to combat insurgent threats to their government has been demonstrated repeatedly since the 1950's. Some have suggested that the success of such efforts is more dependent upon the commitment of the sovereign nation's government than on the expertise of the SOF trainers and that we should abandon this traditional mission.

Rod Paschall, author of LIC 2010, views counterinsurgency assistance as a mission which "should be thrown on the rubbish heap of history."[6] He asserts that counterinsurgency training would be better accomplished on a contract basis with civilian firms. The same author envisions an increase in the opportunity to assist "freedom fighters" seeking to overthrow oppressive, non-democratic regimes. He posits that such assistance can be accomplished from a distance, with our SOF playing a more indirect role. This approach offers the clear advantage of incurring less risk of failure to the U.S., and capitalizes on roles with which we are already familiar. However, it does nothing to expand our capabilities as it reduces by one the capabilities of this particular SOF element. Since we prefer to exercise tight control in sensitive operations of this sort, the civilian contractor option seems unlikely.

The nation-building potential of SOF units is well-established. Organized in "groups," each with a regional orientation, Special Forces are particularly well-suited to roles that require close, continuous interaction with citizens of other countries. Besides being capable of providing basic medical assistance to remote communities, such SOF units can operate from austere bases to assist in construction projects, establish safe water sources, and distribute emergency relief to refugees of regional conflict or victims of natural disasters. These humanitarian assistance missions have been exercised recently in Latin America and Southwest Asia with considerable success.[7]

The same Special Forces units can teach Third World military and police forces basic tactics and techniques to use to interdict illegal drug traffic[8]. With no sign of any reduction of our nation's interest in this program, it seems wise to exploit the capabilities SOF units may offer, as a part of a larger, interagency approach to attacking the supply side of the illegal drug flow into the United States. SOF are natural choices for such missions owing to their regional orientation, language skills, and qualifications as trainers. While some might prefer that these highly trained soldiers executed the missions themselves, current U.S. laws and Department of Defense regulations prevent actual participation in such operations in foreign countries; hence the training role.

Designed with differenct uses in mind, Army Rangers have not traditionally been employed in a foreign military assistance

role. Their organization of three battalions, with a regimental headquarters and configuration as light infantry makes them clearly combat-oriented. Normally employed as a battalion, they are available in platoon through regimental strength (2,200 men). Rangers are extremely proficient in raids, ambushes, seizing and securing airfields, attacking "soft" targets such as command and control centers, and in special recovery operations (hostages or noncombatants). They are particularly suitable for seizing a lodgement and may be used as a security force for more surgical special operations forces.[9] Capable of insertion by parachute, helicopter, boat, or by foot--Army Rangers offer the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command (CINCSOC) great flexibility in employment, as well as tremendous firepower once deployed.[10] Rangers do have limitations that must be considered. Because of their austere combat service support structure, while they are easily deployable, they also require early resupply. They are not equipped for sustained operations nor can they be expected to mount a well-developed defense without considerable augmentation.

The high level of individual motivation, training, and stamina of the average Ranger encourages us to consider other options for their employment. Superbly conditioned and trained for long dismounted infiltrations, they might be productively employed in squads as reconnaissance elements. This role offers some application in the counterdrug mission and would apply particularly in remote areas, where there is much territory to

cover, as presented by our border with Mexico. Rangers' highly developed patrolling skills and long-range communication capability support such an application.

Another possibility for Rangers to perform different functions would be to train them in "peacemaking" operations. Because of their specialized insertion capabilities and their superior individual and stringent fire discipline, Rangers could be assigned the initial entry task without fear of unnecessary collateral damage.[11] Given the mission, and some reallocation of aviation and communications assets to accomplish it, the Ranger Regiment could plan, train for, and execute such contingencies. However, this concept would rely on early handoff of the peacekeeping role to conventional units or an United Nations element. The Ranger Regiment's experience with coalition warfare has heretofore been limited to small scale combined training operations with Jordanian and British paratroop units, usually in the context of larger, joint and combined exercises. This aspect will require more training, as the ability to operate with other nations' forces becomes a more pressing requirement.

Civil affairs and psychological operations units, also part of the SOF array, regularly demonstrate their utility in low intensity conflict. Often working with Special Forces training teams, civil affairs teams operate to reinforce the efforts to establish viable democratic systems. They also execute vital combat support missions in screening refugees and detained persons to identify combatants, and dealing with local officials

to promote cooperation or gather valuable information. Psychological operations (PSYOP) units are able to assist by issuing warnings to hostile forces and encouraging surrender or reducing the enemy's willingness to fight. PSYOP units can also create diversions or deceptions in support of direct action missions by other SOF units or conventional forces. Although they are assigned to the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, civil affairs and PSYOP units frequently operate with conventional units and in conventional operations.

SOF aviation units, organized in one group with both single-aircraft type and composite-type battalions, provide the long-range mobility and precision fires necessary to support SOF ground elements.[12] Equipped with specially modified aircraft and highly-trained crews, SOF aviation units are capable of long-range insertion and extraction tasks beyond the reach of conventional aviation units. Although SOF aviation units focus on covert, low-level flight under conditions of low visibility or adverse weather, the same skills could be applied to the demands of search and rescue or other operations in an area where the presence of U.S. units is politically sensitive. Their habitual relationships with other SOF units make them a natural choice when train-up or coordination time is at a minimum.

Although we have enjoyed a reduction in the overall frequency of terrorist attacks in the past several years, there is no reason to assume that we can therefore reduce our commitment to maintaining counterterrorist forces. Almost

certainly, the existence of a credible counterterrorist capability has had some impact on enemies of this country as they considered the risks involved in such actions. However, the United States remains particularly vulnerable to international terrorism, since our political stability and military and economic power have invited others less fortunate to blame this country for their own problems. Seven Americans (all associated with the Department of Defense) were killed by terrorists last year, so the environment is not entirely benign.[13]

U.S. counterterrorist units, well-resourced and manned with highly motivated and specially skilled soldiers and seamen, can also expand their utility as the Department of Defense is pressed to provide more capability with a shrinking budget. While their specific tactics, techniques and procedures are closely guarded, information available in the public domain indicates that they possess unique capabilities. These include the ability to operate covertly over extended distances in remote or urban settings and to respond quickly to fast-breaking hostage or terrorist crises anywhere in the world.[14]

In theory, these same unit capabilities and individual competencies could be applied in a different role, to capture key persons or equipment for intelligence exploitation or to disrupt enemy command and control. The ability to strike deep within enemy-controlled territory and to seize persons or items selectively, or to destroy a critical control node could have devastating effects on the enemy's morale, as well as on his

ability to control operations. Organized as they are today, it is conceivable that one squadron of Special Forces Operational Detachment--DELTA--might be available for such operations. Any such employment would require a careful assessment of the current terrorist threat, and the level of risk accepted by employing such a valuable asset in this role.

None of this discussion of SOF roles in low intensity conflict is meant to downplay their utility in a mid-intensity situation. The recent use of all these elements in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm provide plenty of examples of their viability and utility in that context. During the Gulf War, Special Forces teams trained conventional coalition units in basic soldier skills before the ground war. They stayed with the coalition units throughout the campaign to provide liaison with U.S. forces.[15] Other Special Forces teams provided valuable special reconnaissance in a way sensors cannot. They tracked enemy troop movements and pinpointed the location of key communication and weapons sites for aerial or artillery strikes, and manned thirteen early warning sites along the Iraqi border. Rangers provided a ready force for the theater CINC to use in strike missions and executed at least one such raid against a key communication site. In fact, other than the battle at Khafji, Special Forces conducted the only combined operations in the campaign.[16]

Operation Desert Storm also showed other key facets of SOF capabilities in mid-intensity conflicts. Civil Affairs units

worked constantly with refugees and surrendering enemy soldiers, and coordinated relief efforts after the conclusion of hostilities. PSYOP units were active with radio and television broadcasts, and with leaflet design and delivery, both of which were judged to have greatly undermined the enemy's will to continue the fight. SOF aviation units provided their doctrinal insertion and extraction support to ground SOF, and attacked objectives of their own. They also provided armed escort to conventional aviation units and conducted covert search and rescue for both ground SOF and downed aviators.[17] SOF aviation units were officially credited for the rescue of at least two Special Forces observation posts which had been compromised during the operation.

SOF units played a major role in Operation Just Cause, providing the critical "eyes and ears" necessary to successfully neutralize 27 essential targets during the initial hours of combat.[18] Army, Air Force, and Navy SOF units combined to seize all the critical objectives, allowing the rapid entry of follow-on conventional forces. Most of the SOF remained in country and operated with conventional units, under the control of the commander of the joint task force until Noriega's surrender.

Clearly, SOF must be integrated into mid-intensity and high-intensity campaigns at every stage of planning and execution. SOF are potent combat multipliers that can increase force potential and capability when we integrate them correctly with conventional forces.[19]

Having considered this vast array of roles and missions for SOF, we need to look beyond these to other ways in which their unique capabilities might be applied in the coming years. Take the Ranger Regiment as an example. If that unit is given the "peacemaking" role suggested by Paschall, the change raises a number of questions: Are they correctly organized for such a mission? Do they have the right equipment for it, particularly with respect to ground mobility and sustainment after the initial assault? Do they have the right military occupational specialties. Will they require linguists? Are there enough Ranger battalions in the force to meet several simultaneous contingencies and a major campaign? This sort of scrutiny will make it clear which "new" roles are feasible under the current organization, and which will require some restructuring of the units.

If the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command developed such concepts for expanding the roles and functions of any his forces, he would establish the requirement and identify any shortfalls in his capability. Lacking a Joint Doctrine Command which mirrors the functions of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), he would pass the requirements to the TRADOC for resolution through the Concept-Based Requirements System (CBRS). This initiative from the CINC provides the entry point to the Army's force integration process. The results of analysis by both material and combat developers are staffed through TRADOC and the Army major commands (MACOM) before being

forwarded to Headquarters, Department of the Army for approval.[20] The process continues through resourcing the unit, accessing personnel, training them, and ultimately fielding a unit which is correctly manned and equipped to meet the CINC's requirement. Given the 39-month cycle of fielding a new unit in response to a new requirement, aggressive steps would be required to be able to meet new challenges in short order. As soon as the basic structure and equipment requirements of the new or revised organization is apparent, the CINCSOC would reorganize the Ranger Regiment as a provisional unit, pending completion of the entire force integration process. Equipment shortfalls could be addressed as much as possible out of excess equipment generated by the downsizing of other parts of the force.

In recent months, the Department of Defense has come under increasing pressure to reassess what roles and missions it can fulfill. Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA) proposed what he calls "Civil-Military Cooperation for Community Regeneration."[21] Listing potential missions ranging from providing "role models" to constructing temporary buildings and administering immunizations, he targets tough problems in our own society.

While it may be a satisfactory match for a military engineer unit to repair roadways, or for medical units to provide health care to impoverished families, the model is strained when we try to apply it to combat units. As Lieutenant General James J. Lindsay said, we must be "very careful" as we select "new roles" for combat units in general and special operations forces in

particular.[22] There is a natural temptation to rush to embrace "new missions" in an effort to be viewed as team players and to retain an active role in the direction of such change. However, where such "new" missions will divert scarce resources from training for combat or erode current capabilities we must be willing to articulate the estimated costs in terms of degraded combat readiness.

Our objective should be to design highly capable multirole forces, particularly in SOF. Though we tend to think of SOF as being highly specialized, some broadening may be necessary, if these units are to remain viable in the more austere defense structure of the coming years. During World War II, the U.S. Navy gave in to the temptation to build a form of special operating forces, which they called Scouts. Admiral Draper Kaufman was dissatisfied with the Marine Corps Raiders' apparent inability to bring back live prisoners for interrogation and Kaufman directed the formation of the new units.[23] As with most short term solutions, the ad hoc organization did not survive the war. To repeat this process in an attempt to respond specifically to today's challenges without taking the long-term view carries a potent risk. We might produce a narrowly-focused unit which is more vulnerable to the budget cutbacks being felt throughout the defense establishment.

Each element of our current Army Special Operations Forces should undergo careful scrutiny, if we are serious about identifying the best ways for them to be employed today and in

the years to come. We know that SOF are effective in their current roles and missions and that many of the same missions will continue to exert demands on our resources, though perhaps in different proportions. What we don't know is the exact nature of the new challenges that await us. We must strike a balance between the versatility demanded by today's fiscal restraints and the desire for highly proficient units. Until we establish a realistic vision of the world as it will be for the next few years and design some viable solutions, we will remain mired in an outdated paradigm.

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[12] U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 3-05: A-8.

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[17] E.M. Flanagan, Jr., "Hostile Territory Was Their AO in Desert Storm," ARMY 41 (September 1991): 14.

[18] Carl W. Stiner, "The Strategic Employment of Special Operations Forces," Army 41 (June 1991): 8.

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[21] Congress, Senate, Senator Nunn of Georgia speaking for Forging Civil-Military Cooperation for Community Regeneration to the U.S. Senate, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record (23 June 1992), vol. 138, no.91, 3602-05.

[22] James J. Lindsay, interview by John M. Mitchell, 17-18 November 1992, Tape recording, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

[23] John Coons Neely, interview by J.W. Williams, 8 February 1992, Handwritten notes, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

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